

Imitation of Life

(Douglas Sirk, 1959)

Component 1: Varieties of film and filmmaking: Section A: Hollywood 1930–1990

Core study areas:

- **Key elements of film form**
- **Meaning and response: aesthetics and representations**
- **Contexts**

Specialist study areas: *Auteur*

Rationale for study: *Imitation of Life* was Douglas Sirk's final Hollywood film. He is famous for using highly-stylised melodrama to daringly explore social issues such as race, class, gender and sexuality.

Imitation of Life was one of the first successful (the sixth highest grossing film of 1959 in the US) films to explore Black American identity and systemic racism, as well as centring the narrative on women's lives and ambitions. In 2015, it was submitted to the Library of Congress National Film Registry as a work that is "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant".

STARTING POINTS – Useful sequences and timings:

"It's a sin to be ashamed of who you are" 0:32:14 – 0:36:11

"Busboys, cooks and chauffeurs!" 1:12:55 – 1:16:05

CORE STUDY AREAS 1 – STARTING POINTS: Key elements of film form (micro features)

Cinematography

- Sirk is renowned for his lush, colour-saturated visuals. Often the colour and lighting are used symbolically in order to express the character's intensified emotions. Consider the use of colour and lighting in key sequences – how do the colours add to the emotional intensity of the scene?
- Consider the title sequence of the film (the gemstones tumbling) and the 'glossy' quality of the aesthetic. Why is this engaging to a spectator? How might it connect, ironically, with the title of the film?
- Many shots are composed to frame characters inside a doorway, window or mirror to visually express the theme that 'life is a performance'.
- During dramatic moments of heightened emotion, Sirk often uses a strip of bright light across the (mostly female) characters' upper face, emphasising the eyes.

Mise-en-scène

- Sirk's most famous films are often classified as melodramas. One of the main features of this genre is to locate almost all the action within the domestic space. For this reason, the set design of the characters' homes often become externalised expressions of the characters' mental states, or of the social hierarchy.

- Consider the layout and design of Lora and Annie's homes at the start of the film, then later after Lora's success. Who inhabits which space, and why?
- Consider Annie and Sarah Jane's first arrival and assignation of living space – what does this tell you about the unspoken hierarchy?
- Examine the layout of the much bigger house in the second half of the film. How does it reflect the characters' social status? (Hint: where are most of Lora's scenes set? Where are Annie's?) Consider the layout of the house and how it enables Sarah Jane to come and go (almost) secretly – how did this reflect the character's psychological state?

Editing

- Most of the film uses the continuity editing technique that was a key feature of Classic Hollywood cinema. The transition between shots and scenes creates the impression that the spectator is an immersed witness, peeking into events taking place 'behind closed doors'.
- The use of continuity editing also allows the drama to escalate across different locations. In the second focus sequence (where Sarah Jane articulates her frustration with her social status), there are a number of separate scenes that are occurring in different rooms in the house, linked together in rising emotional intensity until the main characters move into the kitchen space for a confrontation.



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Sound

- At the time, Sirk was criticised for his use of sweeping orchestral strings to emphasise the emotional intensity of scenes. In *Imitation of Life*, music is used to heighten the drama of scenes featuring conflicts between the characters.
- Compare this to the use of the gospel song *Trouble of the World* that is sung at Annie's funeral. How might the almost 'cheesy' use of dramatic music throughout be appropriate for the themes of 'performing life'? How might the more visceral song at the funeral symbolise Annie's 'real' life that the audience barely sees?

Performance

- Lana Turner and Sandra Dee were extremely popular Hollywood stars when they made the film. Consider how their performance style is 'melodramatic' or exaggerated. Compare their performance to Juanita Moore's performance as Annie – how might these different acting styles again resonate with the film's title and the theme of 'performed' and 'real' lives.

CORE STUDY AREAS 2 – STARTING POINTS: Meaning and response

Representations

- Sirk's most renowned films are famous for placing women's lives (hopes, ambitions, fears and struggles) at the centre of the narrative. In the 1950s, the social expectation for women was to marry and have children in their early twenties, and to become the perfect (and obedient) housewife. The female characters in *Imitation of Life* defy these expectations. Meanwhile, the male characters personify a patriarchal attempt to exploit them or make them conform.
- You should consider their responses to the film's treatment of racial identity. How are the Black characters represented? How are the White characters portrayed, especially in their responses to the Black characters? Think about Lora and her relationship with Annie; Sarah Jane's white boyfriend, or her friend in Los Angeles.

- Consider the final scene of the film. Up until this point, Annie’s life outside of Lora’s home has been virtually invisible – the only hint is when Lora says she had no idea Annie had so many friends, and Annie reveals she is a pillar of the Black community. How does the final scene ‘expose’ the significance of Annie’s life? Some critics have said Sirk intended this to be funeral march not just for the character, but for the entrenched racism of America, precluding the Civil Rights victories of the 1960s – how much do you agree with this view?

CORE STUDY AREAS 3 – STARTING POINTS: Contexts

Social

- Racial segregation in America in the 1950s was a huge social issue that few films ever addressed. You should consider how the film portrays ‘white privilege’, and how the White and Black characters respond to it.
- It was also unusual for women to be financially independent, especially single mothers. It was assumed ambitious and successful women achieved this at the expense of love or family. Consider what Lora and Sarah Jane achieve – what sacrifices do they make? How do their achievements make them feel by the end of the film? Do you think the film is encouraging women to strive for success?

Cultural

- The genre of melodrama was a film evolution of Victorian morality plays. Melodramas became enormously popular in the 1920s and 1930s – in fact, many of Sirk’s films were remakes of films from this period.
- The genre featured stock characters and situations: ambitious modern women struggling with social convention; unscrupulous men who try to pin them down or exploit them; love affairs that go wrong; loose morals; themes of tradition vs modernity. All of these are key themes in *Imitation of Life*.

Political

- The Civil Rights movement aimed to combat policies of segregation and draw attention to

systemic racism in US society. In the years leading up to *Imitation of Life*’s release, there were some key events that would have been forefront of the national consciousness. These included the Rosa Parks-inspired boycott of the Montgomery Bus Service in 1955–6 and the banning of segregated schools in 1954. In 1957, the Civil Rights Act was passed making it illegal to prevent people from voting based on their race.

Institutional

- Sirk is now regarded as a leading American director. However, he had very little control over his choice of projects during his lifetime. Contracted to Universal Studios, he was employed to make films for producer Ross Hunter, who saw the commercial appeal of ‘weepies’. These were melodramatic films aimed at a predominantly female audience, whose mark of success was making the audience cry.
- Hunter also wanted to promote Universal’s roster of stars, and many of Sirk’s films were conceived of as vehicles for actors such as Rock Hudson, Jane Wyman and Barbara Stanwyck.

SPECIALIST STUDY AREA – STARTING POINTS: Auteurs

- Melodramas were hugely popular, but critically dismissed. This meant that many of Sirk’s films were unappreciated until the French New Wave critics/directors wrote about him in their influential magazine *Cahiers du Cinéma*. They proclaimed Sirk an *auteur* – i.e. a filmmaker with a striking personal style and approach.
- The characters of Sirk’s films are often social outsiders who challenge a stagnant and hypocritical society. Sirk was a German *émigré* with a Jewish wife, who fled the Nazis to work in Hollywood. You should consider how this immigrant status influenced the themes and narratives of his films (a good companion piece to *Imitation of Life is All That Heaven Allows*).
- Sirk considered melodrama to have the “necessary distance” to critique society, whilst still delivering an entertaining, emotionally engaging and popular film. The lush visuals

and sweeping scores, as well as the casting of major stars like Lana Turner or Rock Hudson, portrayed an idealised version of bourgeois America. Yet, the narratives showed how these ideals were unattainable and how much of American society was a 'performance', removed from 'real' life.

- Sirk worked very successfully within the studio system of 1950s Hollywood, yet still had a distinctive aesthetic and thematic style. Consider the similarities with other directors of this period who were later considered *auteurs* like Orson Welles, Billy Wilder or Alfred Hitchcock.

KEY SEQUENCE ANALYSIS:

"Busboys, cooks and chauffeurs!"

1:12:55 – 1:16:05

- In this scene, Sarah Jane's social frustrations reach a boiling point.
- Consider the way Sirk uses the different 'zones' in Lora's gigantic house to show Sarah Jane's emotional escalation: beginning on the balcony above the reception area; then down the 'back stairs' into the kitchen; then into the main room; then back to the kitchen.
- Even though her mother and Lora consider her behaviour to be rude and ungrateful, Sirk doesn't encourage us to condemn Sarah Jane. Consider how he uses camera, performance and dialogue to help us empathise with Sarah Jane's ambitions and frustrations. How do they mirror Lora's (more 'acceptable') aspirations from earlier in the film?
- When Sarah Jane serves the food to Lora and her guests, she adopts a stereotypical 'Mammy' voice and behaviour. You could research into this and other Black stereotypes in American films (e.g. most famously in *Gone with the Wind* from 1939). Consider why Sarah Jane has adopted this racial caricature.
- Discussion point: What is the meaning of the film's title? Who is 'imitating' life, and what life are they performing? What is their lived reality? Who has the most authentic life in the film?